

THE NEW TELEVISION:

ESSAYS, STATEMENTS, AND
VIDEOTAPES BY VITO ACCONCI,
JOHN BALDESSARI, GREGORY
BATTCKCK, STEPHEN BECK,
WOLFGANG BECKER, RENE BER-
GER, RUSSELL CONNOR, DOUG-
LAS DAVIS, ED ENSHWILLER,
HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER,
VILEM FLUSSER, HOLLIS FRAMP-
TON, FRANK GILLETTE, JORGE
GLUSBERG, WULF HERZOGENRATH,
JOAN JONAS, ALLAN KAPROW,

A PUBLIC/PRIVATE ART

DAVID KATZIVE, HOWARD KLEIN,
SHIGEKO KUBOTA, BRUCE KURTZ,
JANE LIVINGSTON, BARBARA LONDON,
EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH, TOSHIO MAT-
SUMOTO, JOHN MCHALE, GERALD
O'GRADY, NAM JUNE PAIK, ROBERT
PINCUS-WITTEN, DAVID ROSS,
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Notes on Video as an Artistic Medium



The Three Elements of Video

Because of its electronically produced image, video yields three elements which were simply not available in other media of artistic expression such as painting, photography, theater and film:

1. Instant control of the picture
2. Numerous electronic possibilities
3. Picture playback on monitors

1. To our eyes, reality appears simultaneous with its reproduction -- reality and reflection are juxtaposed. Reality can be drawn directly into the artistic process. This new aspect can be exploited particularly in live closed circuit environments. Nam June Paik's meditation in front of his own image as "Video-Buddha," Bruce Nauman's "Video-Corridor," "Interface" by Peter Campus or Don Graham's room with mirrors and delayed picture playback are excellent examples of such artistic utilization. In day-to-day work with video, the instant control of the recording on the monitor is a decisive new aid which alters the working process itself. In addition, picture and sound are always synchronous without any special personnel or technical help, so that a single person, outfitted with the compact video equipment most in use, can produce a completely finished tape.

Wulf
Herzogenrath

2. The electronic possibilities for picture mixing and alteration (distortion or reversal) as well as various kinds of feedback are artistically useful. Colors can be changed and made "synthetically" and forms can be graduated and repeated in unlimited space. Recordings produced with time-delay can be combined with real-time. These possibilities (which are similar to those of electronic music) were extended by Nam June Paik and his friend Abe through construction of the first videosynthesizer and have since been used by many artists in diverse ways (e.g., tapes by Paik, Emshwiller and Beck, among others).

3. The transmission of the video picture is tied to the monitor, the TV set. This small cubical object is more like a sculpture than a projection surface. Its availability as a compact form has not yet been exploited. There are ^{still only} a few expensive projection systems which can produce ^{an} enlarged picture. The picture area on the ordinary monitor has a fixed ratio of about three to four, a convex surface, and rounded picture corners. As many monitors as desired may be hooked up to play a single tape, or a few monitors may be arranged in a comparatively small space in rows, blocks or pyramids. This potential for combination can provide form as well as content. In addition, either previously recorded images or live "reality" can be seen in different rooms and combined with still other new pictures. (Examples are Frank Gillette's installation with three tapes and monitors, tapes by Acconci, or Allan Kaprow's closed-circuit project with two families.)

Comparison with Film (five film criteria by Siegfried Kracauer)

The new meaning of these three fundamentals of video art is defined by comparison with film. Siegfried Kracauer, one of the most influential film theorists, once demonstrated the special properties of film in a similar manner -- this time, to differentiate film from photography and theater.

1. Representation of physical reality.
2. Editing and mixing.
3. Technical possibilities (slow-motion, superimposition, negative reversal).
4. Portraying discrete movements.
5. Imitation of reality; authenticity.

If we carry these film criteria over to video, it becomes evident that the gap between film and video is just as great as that between theater and film. 89

As for the first criterion, every videotape is more directly linked than film to physical reality since sound and picture are recorded and played back synchronously. From watching TV and its news and live broadcasts, as well as from firsthand experience with demonstration installations in trade or department stores, everyone is familiar with video technique in registering "authenticity." The quotation marks are necessary since no playback can be authentic -- every playback replays reality according to its own technical possibilities. Thus, reality on the monitor is always a two-dimensional reality converted into electronic signals and reproduced in artificial color, whose picture segment and selection are based on manipulation -- even if such manipulation has fewer opportunities to intrude than in a film composed ^{with} various camera settings. Still another aspect of "physical reality" could be interpreted along with Kracauer: the superdimensionality of the film star and his emotions to which the movie goer must respond -- along with an unknown crowd of people, all seated next to each other in the dark. In contrast, the monitor at home, in an exhibition or artist's studio, is always small in size -- it gives its visual information to only a small group of viewers. Here TV and VT are completely equal; this almost intimate form of communication makes it possible to address the viewer personally and provide him with tools for further development of ideas. Again, this authenticity -- whether real or apparent -- could make possible either a greater personal involvement or a greater apathy.

The second special film criterion of Kracauer, editing and mixing, is intentionally avoided by many video artists in order to achieve a higher degree of realism. Mixing with video can also mean the use of several tapes and monitors at the same time. This occurs only in exceptional cases with film (World's Fair panorama and multivision, or Andy Warhol's "Chelsea Girls").

In the third area of technical possibilities video far surpasses film, for the possibilities of electronics mean an almost limitless expansion in which all the means available in film and video can be utilized. In fact, significant films have carried video pictures over onto celluloid since the desired selection of colors and picture distortion could only be realized with the help of video ("2001," "Emerson, Lake and Palmer," and other pop music films).

For portraying movement, the fourth criterion, and for using it as an artistic element as in film, the monitor is too small. In this case it is far surpassed by film. Quick movements, large overall views, panorama, etc., cannot be reproduced in the field of video; it is too intimate a medium.

With the fifth aspect, authenticity, video really comes into its own. Just as film was in certain respects an improvement over theater (as for instance, in the documentary filmed with amateur actors on location), so here video represents a decisive step forward. Films by Andy Warhol ("Empire State Building"), Agnes Varda ("Cleo from Five to Seven") have utilized the possibilities of filming in real time, but they remain exceptions. By contrast, real time and time continuum are basic elements in every video installation which involves the viewer by means of camera and monitor, and play an important role in many tapes.

In order to write about more than just the use of video in general, I would like to introduce three essential areas for the ^{specifically} artistic use of video.

1. "Video as mirror:" video as an instrument of recognition, of perception of one's own limitations, reversal of left and right, mirroring and illustration of the reflections of one's own ego, confrontation with oneself. Tapes by Joan Jonas and Peter Campus as well as the time-delay installations of Frank Gillette or Dan Graham belong to this category. This is perhaps most marked in the video-installation "Interface" by Peter Campus: the viewer steps in front of a glass surface on which he sees two lifesize, incorporeal versions of himself. One he recognizes as his mirror image (with the usual left/right reversal), the other is a projection of himself (with left and right as he is seen by others). Several other artists also use video in this sense to deal with perceptual relativity and our conception of time and space. Naturally, there are ties here to Minimal and Conceptual Art, since many video artists active in this area were formerly Hard Edge painters, the results of whose painting and intellectual postulates led them to this form of video installation. It is precisely such irreconcilable questions of identity and tautology which are themes of contemporary art; the Romantic motifs of the double-self, of reality and appearance can here become visual themes.

2. Video as documentary medium. Photos (real or invented) and objets trouvés are combined by artists into works which evoke a quality of the subject or owner and thereby become topographies of people, events or memories. In this area video comes closer to reality -- that is, video serves as a record of the event itself -- e.g., a tape by Baldessari in which a person imagines what sort of stories could fit certain banal photos. In addition to technical videotapes which portray an artistic process (which might have been as effectively filmed), there are tapes in this documentary form which could only originate in video. An example would be Knoebel's "X-Projection", one of the ^{most} effective video productions of Gerry Schum. In a continuous forty-minute night journey, a floodlight becomes an "X-light" which always appears different according to the object illuminated and its location with respect to the camera (since trees reflect light differently than do walls, streetlamps burn out lightbeams, etc.). The Telethon Group in Los Angeles takes another approach, editing only excerpts from commercial TV, combining beauty contests, political speeches, advertisements, talk shows or sports into new works which are partly nostalgic, partly critical. In exhibitions this group has played their tapes on a TV in a reconstructed typical American livingroom with all the appropriate documentary details. The range of documentary and artistic video thus extends here from "found" collage to more formal material.

3. Video as electronic medium. The electronic image makes possible completely new forms and synthetic colors, picture mixing, alteration and feedback between the picture transmitted and the camera. This especially characteristic property was also present in the very beginning of video's development as an artistic medium. The first decisive steps took place in Cologne. Nam June Paik was a composition student of Karlheinz Stockhausen and learned the fundamentals of electronic music. In the first Fluxus-Actions, Paik and Wolf Vostell altered, distorted and segmented the broadcast TV picture. These actions in galleries and before the art public were the beginnings which Paik pursued vigorously in the U.S. after his arrival in 1965, which resulted in the Paik/Abe synthesizer.

While electronic music has gained considerable advantage over instrumental music in timbre, nuance, rhythm and textural complexity, it must however be asked to what extent electronically produced pictures express some-

thing beyond themselves. Perhaps we are still too much in the beginning stage to judge this now -- especially when we are more interested in artistic results than in working methods.

Actually, however, video would have a future not only in scientific, educational and therapeutic fields, but in art as well if Walter Benjamin's thoughts are followed through -- viz., the public will accept an avant-garde film -- since it is aimed at mass reproduction -- sooner than a painting, sculpture or similar artwork which is surrounded by an aura of uniqueness and is available only once. This is where the mass medium of TV can set the pace for the distribution of artistic VT, for video is in itself aimed at reproduction and distribution and in its ideal form of general distribution it unites both authenticity and the representation of reality. At the same time, it meets the "legitimate demand that the individual today has to his own representation" (Walter Benjamin). The distribution of Super-8 films could never fulfill this demand since the result for the individual of its creation, screening technique and degree of verisimilitude is basically distinct from the film shown in a theater which results from ^a the finely coordinated collaboration between direction, camera- and lightingmen, scriptwriter, actors, editor, producer, etc. This distinction does not exist between public programs and video programs shown on the same TV set inasmuch as the viewer considers the TV picture a reality in which he has a share, which reflects his own problems and desires (even with such screenplays as Orson Welles' American film on the landing of extraterrestrial beings or the German "Millionenspiel" by Wolfgang Menge). This could also explain the unusual success of the exhibition of artistic video installations in the first museum to devote itself to this new art medium, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. With video, the grasping of ideas, involvement in the work, familiarity with some of the technical aspects, and confidence in the relevance of what is to be viewed make difficult problems more easily accessible to the public than the painting, sculpture, or other "object" art formerly denoted by the term avant-garde, whose aura of elite knowledge consciously or unconsciously rendered approach more difficult.

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